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“Seeking out Strangeness”: Tony Kushner’s *Homebody/Kabul*

Abstract: Tony Kushner’s 1997 play *Homebody/Kabul* tells a story of an English woman who decides to leave her cozy London flat, travel to Kabul and marry a Muslim. Her English husband and daughter follow her to Afghanistan only to fall victim to all kinds of cultural misunderstandings. The play, staging multiple dislocations on personal, cultural and linguistic levels, presents characters forced to inhabit a foreign and hostile culture which they cannot describe, comprehend and, eventually, survive. By placing his protagonists in an entirely different cultural milieu from the one they were brought up in, Kushner creates a possibility for investigating the impact of cultural difference. The play dramatizes subversive power of ordinary words and everyday activities which assume disruptive potential when confronted with a foreign culture. Ultimately, Kushner’s idea is to present the Western mind and identity as cultural constructs which are very difficult to transgress and negotiate.

1

Tony Kushner’s 1997 play *Homebody/Kabul* tells an outlandish story of an English woman (Homebody) who suddenly decides to abandon her London flat and family and travels to Kabul. The moment the woman leaves the borders of Great Britain, she virtually disappears off the scene, supposedly being killed by the Taliban who would not tolerate a Western woman (with a discman, listening to Frank Sinatra) walking non-tourist districts of “their” city. Yet, when the search party, comprising her daughter Priscilla and husband Milton, arrives in Kabul, it turns out that Homebody may not be dead, that she actually staged her own death to mislead those who follow her and to cover up real intentions of staying in Kabul for ever. A major part of Kushner’s play is, then, a drama without the protagonist, a story from which the principal character has been removed.

Homebody’s absence is perhaps more meaningful and definitely more productive when it comes to moving the plot ahead than it would be with the character constantly present on stage. The search for Homebody, dead or alive, evolves into an attempt to understand her motives to leave England and her well-

organized, metropolitan life. All parties involved, and that accounts not only for her closest family but also a Pashtun official, a doctor, a local man, and a representative of the British government, discuss issues concerning a deeply felt experience of and fascination with a foreign culture, and analyze not only possible reasons for but also outcomes of this willed displacement, or rather misplacement. In general, Kushner's story dramatizes inevitable clashes that the Western mind suffers in contact with the cultural Other. *Homebody/Kabul* portrays a representative of the West who follows her dream of the East in which the Orient is viewed as more spiritual, magical and authentic than what is offered by European or American civilization. It is through the dream of the East that the woman attempts to recreate her lost identity and faith.

2

The key to understanding Homebody's decision to emigrate lies in her intellectually dense, emotionally loaded, thirty-pages long monologue which opens the play. When it was staged in New York, critics wrote about "Kabul marathon" (Simmons), appreciating its complex mixture of personal detail, historical background on Afghanistan and erudite show-off. In the monologue, Homebody tells the story of her husband's party which she wanted to organize in a way different from usual. She decided to visit a shop run by an Afghan man to buy strange hats. The encounter with the man triggers an unexpected and completely uncontrolled reaction which ultimately leads to her leaving England and starting a new life elsewhere.

In the opening section of the monologue, Homebody stresses firmly: "The subject strikes my fancy: Kabul – you will see why, that's the tale I'm telling" (9). Therefore, the play's primary aim is to explain one's obsession, to investigate a peculiar form of transgression in the process of which a Londoner suddenly develops an interest in a foreign culture: staying in one place, she lives in another. Objects collected in the Afghan shop pose as true representatives of a fascinating culture, the culture that the protagonist imagines to be richer, better, more spiritual than her own: "[T]here are shops full of merchandise from exotic locales, wonderful things made by people who believe, as I do not, as *we* do not, in magic" (10). The "magic shop" offers contact, even if limited, with the sacred and with spiritual experience which, Homebody feels, are no longer present in her native environment. Frequent visits to the shop make her understand what her life is like. A direct experience of the cultural difference opens a possibility to define, judge, criticize and reject her own lifestyle – she realizes some change

is needed. Cultural homogeneity in which she has lived so far is momentarily broken up. From the very beginning, *Homebody's* encounter with otherness imposes a necessity to transgress the well-composed image of the self.

However, the little Afghan curiosity shop, which the protagonist presents as an enclave of spirituality in the midst of metropolitan profanity, in the eyes of the majority turns out to be a collection of worthless junk. Unexpectedly, *Homebody* becomes aware of the prejudices her own culture imperceptibly imposes:

I had seen these abbreviated fezlite pillbox attenuated yarmulke millinarisms, um, *hats*, I'm sorry I *will* try to stop, *hats*, yes, in a crowded shop on _____ (*Gesture*) which I must have passed and mentally noted on my way towards God knows what, who cares, a dusty shop crowded with artifacts, relics, remnants, little... doodads of culture once aswarm with spirit matter; radiant with potent magic, the disenchanted dull detritus of which has washed up upon our culpable shores, its magic now shriveled into the safe container of *aesthetic*, which is to say, *consumer* appeal. You know, Third World Junk. (17)

It appears that what acquires aesthetic status within a given cultural context simultaneously becomes extinct and practically defunct. Once an object shifts from the routine of practical use to the sphere of purely aesthetic appreciation, it loses all its "potent magic." In other words, the interest that the Westerner exhibits in objects coming from a different culture enforces a direct and decisive change in their status and value. Kushner seems to be saying that cultural migrations are virtually impossible. What used to possess spirituality and practical usefulness, having been replanted into a foreign and hostile culture of London metropolis, can only be seen as having "consumer appeal," and be looked down upon as "Third World Junk."

Homebody understands that immediately when she enters the Afghan shop and that is how her escape away from the culture of "consumer appeal" and a journey towards "potent magic" commence. She perceives the shop and what is sold in it in terms of dislocation – the fate that she is going to meet herself: "The hats are beautiful; relatively inexpensive; sinister if you've the mind to see them that way; and sad. As dislocations are. And marvellous, as dislocations are always bloody" (18).

Homebody's fascination with the Oriental shop brings to mind what Edward Said would call "Orientalism," that is, "a system of knowledge about the Orient" (*Orientalism* 6). Undoubtedly, the visit to the shop opens up the protagonist to a new cultural experience which she has to come to terms with. It offers a perspective, unknown and mysterious, which generates a need for explanation and understanding, and thus also a new language and set of concepts. What is more, by being so strikingly different from what she knows as her native

environment, Afghan culture represented by a collection of relocated merchandise provides, again in Said's words, "deepest and most recurring images of the Other" (*Orientalism* 1). Forming a layer in her subconscious (as she stresses in her monologue: "I must have passed and mentally noted [the shop] on my way towards God knows what"; 17), this experience helps Homebody to redefine her own identity in the way similar to that in which "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient" (*Orientalism* 3). Homebody's encounter with the surrogate Afghan culture defines her by the very contrast which she feels she has to accommodate and embrace.

Homebody's opening monologue is intricately composed of the protagonist's comments and confessions as well as extensive quotes from Nancy Hatch Dupree's *An Historical Guide to Kabul*.¹ The story of the culture beginning to develop 3000 years BC is presented with the logic and neatness of the Western mind. Yet, extensive fragments which Homebody just reads directly from the book and incorporates into her own story also convey her respect and admiration towards a culture and a people with such a complex and violent history. References to historical events and great men who visited the region of the Kabul Valley (like Alexander the Macedonian or Genghis Han) play an important function. The protagonist begins to perceive Afghanistan's past as part of world history and the country itself as a place on a map which is not completely disconnected from the continents an ordinary European is able to outline. The obsessive urge to read about Afghanistan reflects the desire of her disturbed mind to form a picture and to imagine the object of her fascination.

The need to frame the "Other" in the set of new concepts in an obvious way follows the logic of "orientalist's imagination." The presentation of the narrative taken from *An Historical Guide to Kabul* ultimately dislocates the image of Afghan indigenous culture – as any guidebook story, it translates an unknown culture into simplified concepts and basic terms accessible to a Westerner. In other words, Dupree's book brings a foreign culture for display and imposes a

¹ Nancy Hatch Dupree is a world-famous art historian and archaeologist who has devoted her life to excavating and documenting Afghan art and culture. For a long time, Dupree was associated with the National Museum in Kabul. After its plundering during the Taliban rule she has been involved in a widespread search for stolen exhibits. Dupree has written five books about Afghanistan and its cultural heritage. Her historical narrative not only constitutes a major part of Kushner's opening monologue but also provides an introductory framework which helps to acquire basic concepts and categories necessary for understanding foreign, Afghan culture.

rational understanding of events and phenomena laced with magic and mystery. Therefore, what *Homebody* really does is produce her own version of Afghan culture, manufactured to meet the needs of her secularized and jaded existence.²

3

Homebody is a tourist who suddenly decides to travel outside the beaten track designed for package holidays. She disappears after the opening monologue and the rest of the play tells a story of the search undertaken by her daughter and her husband. However, the primary topic of the second part of the play is to present various forms of encounter with foreign, mysterious and violent culture that Afghanistan has developed over years of bloody conflict. The impact of "otherness" leads to various responses ranging from overwhelming fascination to absolute rejection. However, reactions to such an encounter are always presented as a sounding board for people's views; they facilitate transgression, provided a character is ready for it.

Quango,³ a representative of the British government, is riveted by the intense experience that living in Kabul gives. It can take a purely emotional form: "I stay because Afghanistan broke my heart" (53), or, more importantly, it turns into a medical condition, leading to a state of incurable illness:

Blew my mind. That's better. Afghanistan blew my mind. . . . to bits, and now I cannot get it back. It's like a disease, this place. (54)

The disease that the city spreads gives access to knowledge and increases awareness of its history and atrocities committed by all sides of the conflict. To a somewhat sterile and restless Western mind the experience of bloodshed and carnage that the Oriental history contains offers a purifying shock. The sickness provides a healthy perspective on the life lived in the "civilized" world of European or American cities. When *Homebody*'s daughter goes searching for

² In the same way Said describes European colonial history: "European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, military, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period" (*Orientalism* 3). *Homebody*, as a representative of Western civilization, is presented in the process of "producing" her own version of the foreign culture.

³ His telling name indicates an individual whose identity is partly affiliated with his native culture and partly taken over by foreignness of the local, indigenous culture. In other words, Quango is presented at a transitory stage, unsure of where he belongs. He is described as an "aid worker, unofficial liaison for the British government in Kabul" on Kushner's list of characters (3).

her mother, guided by a local man, she is moved and fascinated by what she sees. Sheer facts which Priscilla learns impose a reaction, a response, a type of experience unavailable in her ordinary life:

Oh my God it's so good to, to stop, to draw breath. I haven't breathed since... Well for days.
Oh my God I've never seen anything so... I've never travelled. Not anywhere. We were to Paris once but I didn't look. Who'd have thought Hiroshima after the bomb would look so lovely? (56)

Kushner presents Priscilla as an example of a modern tourist, that is, a person who changes places but never really travels and never allows herself to appreciate the difference. She is unable to respond to cultural diversity since she remains blind to any form of otherness that might offer itself for exploration. However, the Afghan experience leads to a slow change. The dislocation has a fertilizing effect and creates a possibility for transgressing one's stable identity. Ultimately, Priscilla sees in Kabul another Hiroshima. She is surprised to discover beauty enveloped in its dirt and destruction. More importantly, she understands that Kabul is a city sacrificed for the sake of international politics. The comparison between Kabul and Hiroshima allows her to construct a different narrative in which Afghanistan's capital appears as a tortured city and as a martyr whose suffering is made more acute for the lack of attention from the outside world.

Purified perception of her own identity as well as heightened sensitivity to places and people she encounters during her visit result from a deep appreciation of the city's suffering. It gives access to layers of feeling unavailable for ordinary Western man or woman. As Priscilla puts it:

The twilight outside, it's... powdery. Everything feels close here, the air, the mountains, not crowding in but there's... well, proximity. Intimacy. Perfume. Like stepping into her clothes closet. I have this feeling. (66)⁴

Having left crowded streets of metropolitan London, the character discovers real intimacy, the possibility of close contact and proximity in which the world offers itself up for a different kind of exploration. Furthermore, experiencing Kabul in this way means feeling close to her absent mother, who – having no

⁴ By contrast, Homebody describes life in London as a state of being imprisoned by human presence. Metropolitan life is deprived of privacy: "[I]f a thing can be said to *be*, to *exist*, then such is the nature of these expansive times that this thing which is must suffer to be *touched*. Ours is a time of connection; the private, and we must accept this, and it's a hard thing to accept, the private is gone. All must be touched. All touch corrupts. All must be corrupted" (11).

material presence – seems to speak through stones and rubble of the demolished streets and houses among which she has disappeared. The play dramatizes a sense of personalized geography. It proves that spaces rarely have objective existence. Instead, they present themselves as mixtures of the real and the imagined, as material carriers of personalized visions. When Priscilla cannot find her mother's body in any hospital in Kabul, she arrives at an absurd conclusion: "Perhaps as they moved her body from one hospital to another, perhaps at every hospital they left some piece of her. So now... she's scattered all over Kabul. The whole city. It's her" (60). The city, then, is personified as a woman while the search for her body no longer resembles a dangerous expedition into an unknown territory.

Places like Kabul or Hiroshima mentioned by Priscilla defy the fixity of cartography. They exist and do not exist on official maps, or, in other words, they dissolve into non-reality of what is being written, said or gossiped about them. Such oneiric, partly unreal, cities appear to be constructions based on how people remember them or what people wish them to be. An aura of myth and wishful thinking travels faster and further than the real image and it is its power that attracts people to visit foreign places, their home-made Meccas. Arriving in Kabul, Priscilla's mother was trying to find the legendary grave of Cain, the supposed founder of the city. Yet, because she was not sure where to look for it, she put a question mark next to the most probable location. As one of the local men says, looking at the map she was using:

This says, not "Grave of Cain," but rather, "Grave of Cain?" She was pursuing a rumor. On no official map is there ever a question mark. This would be an entirely novel approach to cartography. The implications are profound. To read on a map, instead of "Afghanistan," "Afghanistan?" It would be more accurate, but such an accuracy as might discombobulate more than mere geography and make the hierophants of all fixed order dash madly for cover. (68)

The dislocated protagonist's search ultimately proves to be aimed at finding a source of spiritual renewal. Yet, the odyssey towards new spirituality is thwarted by the fact that religious experience cannot be precisely located; it has no fixed position nor known coordinates. It is, in other words, a cultural product, a legend or fantasy that Western nations concoct to enhance the "authentic" spirituality of the Orient. The central paradox of *Homebody's* predicament boils down to the fact that she travels to distant lands to look for what constitutes the crux of European biblical tradition. It is as if the visit to Afghanistan was a pilgrimage to the new Holy Land to pay respect to the shrines of dead prophets. Yet, paradoxically, *Homebody* is after Cain, the man guilty of fratricide, the first murderer, the biblical incarnation of jealousy and bloodthirsty desire for

revenge. Her fate seems to be doomed from the very start as she turns into another victim of the cursed city and its founder.

To attach this biblical image to the city of Kabul means to place a mark of death on its history, to confine its past and present identity to the narrow walkway of murder and carnage. As Kushner stresses:

I was moved by the fact that the city of Kabul was Cain's resting place. In the play I suggest that he was, perhaps, murdered there. Over the centuries, so many people have died in Kabul, in Afghanistan, the number of the slain in the last four decades perhaps exceeding all those who had fallen in all centuries before. (Afterword 148)

It would be hard to find a better example to illustrate how a Western man develops his understanding of an Oriental territory and culture. Kushner's play presents a mixture of fact and fiction, of modern history and ancient mythology. His story occupies a liminal space between real events and their imagined roots. It is a narrative in which the content of current affairs broadcast worldwide by press agencies is explicated with the symbolism of biblical imagery. As Kushner mentions in his comments about the play, the legend about Cain's death in Kabul

has a resonance in the Holy Scriptures in which we are told that Cain's sons, Jabal, Jubal and Tubalcain, were the human race's first musicians and metalsmiths. There is attached to this destroyer, this hunter, this solitary, desperate, cursed figure of ultimate barrenness, some potential for that renewal of life which is human creativity. Cain is the founder of a city as well as a fratricide, the father of the arts as well as the first person to usurp God's power of determining mortality, the first person to usurp the role of the angel of death. (Afterword 148)

The double symbolism of the Cain figure is paralleled with the dubious status of the British, among other nations, who have been present in the region since the early nineteenth century.⁵ Regardless of whether they were about to reinstate peace or bring about war, their involvement inevitably meant colonial

⁵ One of the most powerful techniques in Kushner's repertoire is to use biblical imagery to circulate political agenda. Therefore, his practical interventions, which use religious imagery and frequent references to Jewish background and mystical wisdom, deflect criticism for staying on the surface of political reality. Such deliberately provocative images can be used as ammunition to wage wars for equality and democracy – Kushner's favourite values. In one of his manifesto essays, before admitting: "I am a homosexual, after all," he writes the following: "At any other time spit's nasty, but when you kiss it is... well, nectar, nepenthe, gone over from spit to nepenthe in a transubstantiation more divine than that accomplished in any Holy Mass" ("Fick Oder Kaputt!" 13).

domination. Its sad remnants mark local spaces with indelible signs of fraternal and genocidal conflict. Sharing moral ambiguity with Cain's life, many British soldiers found their final resting place in Afghanistan:

KHWAJA. Several hundred British soldiers were slaughtered here in 1841. This pillar marks the –

PRISCILLA. We already passed the pillar for the... the soldiers, hours and hours ago. Are we going in circles?

KHWAJA. There are many pillars, many slaughtered British soldiers. (55)

The juxtaposition of two temporal dimensions in which the present is distanced in a Brechtian manner by the historical perspective, revealing a long tradition of the Western colonial presence and failed attempts to intervene in the region, is presented as a significant factor in understanding both *Homebody's* and *Priscilla's* characters.⁶ On the one hand, Kushner wants to stress the fact that his female protagonists belong to a similar tradition of Oriental conquest in which the distant territory and exotic locations are subject to both intellectual, philosophical or religious reinterpretation and material or geographic subjugation. On the other hand, the characters are presented as drastically opposed to the creeds of the civilization represented by the notorious British soldiers of 1841. Actually, the play emerges as a tribute to the richness and spiritual depth of indigenous Afghan culture and as a striking reminder that the Western world has long forgotten its religious and cultural roots. *Homebody's* journey from London to Kabul, fuelled by her burning interest in Afghan history and folklore, signifies a reversed colonial impulse, a form of positive Orientalism which elevates and idealizes native cultures and traditions, instead of placing them at a lower level of social or civilizational advancement. Therefore, if a typical colonial attitude towards the Oriental Other was to deprive it of its history, to imagine its inhabitants as "people without History" (Said, *Culture* 63–64), *Homebody/Kabul* presents a reversed situation in which native Afghan history is returned its proper place and given back central importance in the annals of world's historiography. Furthermore, if one was to follow Said's contention that in the eyes of Western man the Oriental "reality has not historically and culturally required attention" (*Culture* 63–64), Kushner's act of

⁶ Kushner's enthusiasm for Brecht has both political and artistic roots: "I read the *Short Organum*, which is the point at which I fell completely in love with Brecht. I read all of *Brecht on Theater*. The *Short Organum* was a kind of revelation for me. It was the first time I believed that people who are seriously committed political intellectuals could have a home in the theater, the first time I believed theater, really good theater, had the potential for radical intervention, for effectual analysis. The things that were exciting me about Marx, specifically dialectics, I discovered in Brecht, in a wonderful witty and provocative form" (Kushner qtd. in Vorlicky 106).

rebellion against tradition boils down to the fact that the playwright directs his interest and careful attention towards this native culture in a sort of apologetically affirmative gesture. In the image of the idealised Afghanistan and the portrayal of its sophisticated culture one may see the guilty conscience of a writer who is famous for siding with various oppressed minorities and who is blatantly outspoken in his criticism of the Bush administration.⁷

4

Homebody/Kabul premiered in 1999 (Chelsea Theatre Centre, London) but its most powerful and moving production was given by New York Theatre Workshop in December 2001 (directed by Declan Donnellan). One of the reasons for the spectacular publicity that the production received was the fact that it was staged a few months after the attacks on the World Trade Center. In an obvious way, the play which originated largely as a literary fantasy immediately turned into an open statement on the relations between the two cultures. Its politics was suddenly pushed to the fore; it captured the spirit of the moment and planted a firm statement in the debate on the alleged “clash of civilizations.” As one of the reviewers observed about the heroine of the play:

It was in December 2001 to be exact – only weeks after the events of 9/11 forever transformed New York’s sense of itself – that she was introduced to Manhattan audiences as the title character of Tony Kushner’s “Homebody/Kabul”. For many of us this graciously awkward woman of flighty, elliptical speech and ineffable convictions offered warming comfort in a world that had taken on a newly aggressive chill. (Brantley)

The very presentation of the cultural exchange between the Muslim world and Western culture, the idea that the Afghanistan ruled by the Taliban had once had a highly sophisticated history, must have been seen by many as ludicrous when the global conflict was just tearing the two worlds wide apart. However, it is precisely this appreciation of difference and the ability to transgress the here and now of the current situation that constitute the theme of the play, which was most clearly visible at the time of fierce hostility between cultures.

⁷ As a vociferous commentator of American politics, Kushner is on record as saying that George W. Bush is a “feckless blood-spattered plutocrat” (Afterword 145) or even more drastically suggesting that “Bush or Reagan or a Hitler or the Neo-Nazi skinheads who are now beating up disabled people in Germany, that these people are really just part of the human community, and that there is some way... you should be able to convince them of the inappropriateness of their system and reason them out of their evil behavior” (qtd. in Vorlicky 33).

In the play's afterword, Kushner elaborates on the form of cultural relocation which results from personal grief and discomfort. *Homebody's* gesture of refusal to participate in the life of the Western civilization is elevated to a parable of human fate:

Homebody/Kabul is a play about Afghanistan and the West's historic and contemporary relationship to that country. It is also a play about travel, about knowledge and learning through seeking out strangeness, about trying to escape the unhappiness of one's life through an encounter with Otherness, about narcissism and self-referentiality as inescapable booby traps in any such encounter; and it's about a human catastrophe, a political problem of global dimensions. It's also about grief. (Afterword 142)

The story of a London woman exemplifies a universal history of Western civilization in which men and women in a narcissistic and egocentric way seek strangeness and knowledge by travelling and conquering foreign lands. Yet, it can also be read as an image of a "human catastrophe" of personal and global proportions in which people plagued by grief and tragedy find themselves forced out of home. Kushner, for whom being Jewish seems to be equally about precarious personal experience and about a strange historical predicament, subtly weaves the motif of the Wandering Jew into his play.⁸

The play ends with a change of places between *Homebody* and Mahala, a Muslim woman who travels to London with *Homebody's* family to replace her in the very same house, the very same chair. She has been expelled from her native Afghan community for being too learned, too liberal and too outspoken. Pronounced mad, the woman seizes the first available opportunity to travel to a western country. Yet, her first truly free and spontaneous decision on arrival in London is to begin reading an English translation of the Quran, the very symbol of the culture she fled from.

The play comes full circle with the last scene. It is under the influence of changed cultural conditions that the two female characters find their homes. *Homebody* marries a Muslim man and Mahala occupies her new London house, returning to a regular contact (through an English translation) with religion, which allows her to say: "I am myself becoming a Muslim again" (137). It is significant that the last section of the play is called "Periplum," a term taken

⁸ For Kushner, contemporary Jewishness is a category not necessarily connected with a particular religious or political situation; it rather is a general condition of the mind or a specific perspective from which the world is viewed (vide *Angels in America*). As he says in one of the interviews: "[W]e are not a religion, it makes everyone uneasy to think of us as a race, including Jews, it's very odd; we've wound up being the oddest phenomena in modern history" (qtd. in Vorlicky 83).

from Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, standing for a human perspective in writing history. It does not refer to a map made by cartographers who traditionally occupy a privileged position with a full bird's-eye view at their disposal, but instead it signifies an individual's position in comprehending reality.⁹ Homebody's story seen in this light serves as a stark reminder that history is ultimately written by individuals against larger, hegemonic discourses, narratives or ideas.

The Muslim woman in London attains full cultural integration. She stays in Homebody's house and takes care of her garden. She reads her books and speaks of self-fulfilment:

It is lovely here. I am gardening now! To a Kabuli woman, how shall I express what these English gardens mean? Your mother is a strange lady; to neglect a garden. A garden shows us what may await us in Paradise. (139–40)

It is through "seeking out strangeness" that Kushner's characters discover their new identity. It should then be read as a true sign of cultural transgression (but also productive, cultural integration with the Other) that a Muslim woman feels obliged to teach the English how to maintain their gardens.

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⁹ Kushner's play is preceded with quotes from a number of different authors, providing a broad cultural context for the play that follows. Hugh Kenner is cited on the concept of periplum in Pound's poetry: "»Periplum« is Pound's shorthand for a tour which takes you round then back again. And such a tour is by definition profitable, if not in coins then in knowledge" (Kushner, *Homebody* 8).